



## PROJECTION OF EXPLOITATION AND WOMEN OPPRESSION IN THE POETRY OF HAMID KHAN

**Abdul Karim Khan,**

Assistant Professor,

Department of English & Applied Linguistics, University of Science & Technology, Bannu, KP, Pakistan.

akarim.khan@yahoo.com

### Abstract

*This paper focuses on the theme of exploitation and women oppression foregrounded in the poetry of Hamid Khan. In a patriarchal society such as India and Pakistan, it often happens that women are deprived of their basic rights. While analysing the poetry of Hamid Khan, the scholar has found the issue of women oppression foregrounded in the following poems: N.A. Reflections, Circus Girl, Dualism, Winter, Deodasi, The Stranger. In this stylistic analysis only the tools of foregrounded were applied, i.e. deviation and parallelism. Moreover, the poems that projected the issue of women oppression and exploitation are given in the appendix.*

**Key Words:** Exploitation, women oppression, foregrounding, deviation, parallelism.

### Introduction

Hamid Khan has been writing poetry since he was a student of MA English at the department of English, University of Peshawar. He did MPhil and PhD in English, besides his life long public service as CSP at various capacities. At first his poetic works and short stories were published in the dailies “The Muslim” and “The Frontier Post”. Moreover, most of his poetry is published in “Journal of English Literary Club” (a literary magazine published by the Department of English, University of Peshawar). He remained the editor of JELC, 1982-83 issue. He also published “Three Voices” in collaboration with Daud Kamal and Raja Ikram. He was awarded many times for his literary pursuits. In her introductory comments to *Velvet of Loss* (2002), Waheeda Farhat has very aptly said that “Hamid Khan's poetry manifests human feelings, human values which cannot be put to the altar of undue criticism. Human values/feelings, whatever forms they have, are the assets of humanity.” (p.6). Professor Faqri Jadoon, in his commentary on *Velvet of Loss* (ibid), maintains in this regard that “through small poems, more like humorous musical strokes, Hamid Khan touches the harsh reality of life.” (P. 9).

Hamid Khan uses English as a medium for spreading his messages through poetry. He highlights social problems that upset the very peace of the world in general and Pakistan in particular. He does so through his peculiar concise and compact style which he achieves through foregrounding. In both the Khan collections, *Velvet of Loss* and *Pale Leaf (Three Voices)*<sup>1</sup>, the poems that foreground the social evils of exploitation and women oppression are: *N.A. Reflections, Circus Girl, Dualism, Winter, Deodasi* and *The Stranger*.

### Method

After having analysed all the poems of Hamid Khan through the tools of foregrounding (deviation and parallelism), the themes of exploitation and women oppression were found in

<sup>1</sup> *Pale Leaf* is Khan's part of the collaborative work, *Three Voices*.



seven poems. Parallelism was found in the forms of assonance, consonance and alliteration. Similarly, deviation from normal usage of English was found in abundance that compels the reader's attention towards the implied messages. In the process of analysis, every word, phrase, sound, and structure were taken under consideration for possible deviation and parallelism.

### Analysis and Discussion

These social evils have become routine matters in the context of Pakistan specifically and elsewhere in the world generally. These issues are raised in the poems, titled as *N.A. Reflections*, *Circus Girl*, *Dualism*, *Winter*, *Deodasi* and *The Stranger* coupled with the repeatedly occurring word, *bird*.

In *N. A. Reflections* Khan's selection of linguistic choices and parallel sounds project women oppression, cruelty and exploitation. The engraved illegible writing on the stone and reference to Homer takes us to the world's history that is replete with stories of bloodshed and exploitation. Through the introduction of the ellipses after *white foam*, and *emerald green*, Khan highlights the incompetence of man to comprehend the great lessons in the work of Nature as they have given away their lives to material gains only and have abandoned living in close contact with Nature. The continuity of life is foregrounded through the personification of the Indus, though powerful men lived as if they would remain on the planet forever such as Pharaohs who built colossal mausoleums and used mummification to make themselves as monumental, but their tombs show that no matter how much one gets stronger and exerts force to subjugate others, one day they will leave their world and all their pomp and show for eternal abode. This idea is projected through the word, *tear*, on the black stone. The message of exploitation and cruelty is also foregrounded through the repetition of the phonemes. They make the anagram, *mercy is cut*, that supports the theme under discussion.

To fully understand life in the northern Areas of Pakistan, we must first introduce them. Northern areas of Pakistan refer to the pre-partition self-administered states in the Sub-continent that are now part of the Pakistani administration. The search engine [www.visitpak.com](http://www.visitpak.com) provides a concise account of these areas. It states that:

*Bounded in the west by Afghanistan, separated from Russia in the north-west by a narrow neck of land nowhere wider than fifty kilometers (30 miles), with China to the north and Indian held Kashmir to the east, northern areas of Pakistan, tumultuous and magnificent, draws the breath of all who fall under its spell. ...The region consists of the old Gilgit and Baltistan agencies, the former fiefdoms of the Hunza and Nagar, now divided into three administrative districts, the Swat and Chitral valleys and the green hills above the Grand Trunk Road between Peshawar and Rawalpindi. ...This glittering mosaic of human cultures contains many different ethnic groups and tribes, some the descendants of Genghis Khan and Tamurlane, some of Mongol, Aryan and Turanian stock all homogenized by their shared Islamic faith but for one exception, the pagan Kalash of Chitral. (first para, 2018)*

Researchers from Agha Khan University Karachi conducted study on the prevalent anxiety and stress among the women living in the northern areas of Pakistan. In their conclusion Dodani, Rukhsana, and Zuberi (2000) stated that:

*One hundred and twenty women, between the ages of 16 and 60, attended the SMC over a two month period and were included in the study. Using HADS, it was found that*



*50% of the women had anxiety and/or depression; 25% suffered only from anxiety, 8% from depression and 17% had features of both....This study supports the previous studies of stress in remote areas and also contradicts the belief that people who live in the remote rural areas lead stress-free lives or have low rates of psychiatric morbidity (JPMA 50:138)*

They (ibid) quote WHO report of 1997 that states that depression women suffer from depression twice more frequently than men and this number is increasing day by day. They also refer to Mumford's (1996) study that claims that those who live farther from the city nuisance live comparatively stress-free life. Dodani, et al (2000) have shown through their research that this belief is misleading. They maintain that people living in the remote areas such as Northern Areas of Pakistan can have greater anxiety and stress than those who live in contact with the modern world and share basic facilities of life. They have also concluded in their study that prevalent psychiatric disorders in women living in the mountainous and remote areas of Pakistan is higher than that of Olinda, Brazil, or the urban slums of Mumbai. (Ilons, 1995)

Poor health facilities in the northern areas of Pakistan add to the growing list of problems of the people of the area, especially the women folk. Dodani, et al (2000) provides the statistics of the medical facility in these word:

*The Single Medical Center (SMC) is located in the Ghizer district of the Punial Valley in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. It serves a population of over 10,000 and is 50 km from Gilgit, which is the capital of the Northern Areas. The majority of the people are Muslims, of whom 70-80% belong to the Ismaili sect and are the followers of the religious leader. His Highness Prince Aga Khan IV. The literacy rate is over 40%, unusually high for Pakistan because of the educated and well-knit Ismaili Community.(JPMA 50:140, 2000)*

With all the beauty of colour, water, foam, the Northern Areas of Pakistan are *speaking loud* of the sorry state of affairs. These astonishingly attractive places to human eye and heart are a real blessing of God on the earth, but to reach there and enjoy the serene lap of Nature one must take the risk of life as well, at certain places. In his article published in *The Dawn* titled as *Gilgit Baltistan's Ground Realities*, Jamil Nagri (May 20, 2018) relates the poor condition of the areas in these words:

*There were plans to build a rock-climbing wall in Skardu and in Gilgit, to rehabilitate the demote Polo ground,...to build rest houses on on the Indus River and a five-kilometer-long trekking track in Hunza. ...Barring notable exceptions, most plan remained on paper. (p 2, EOS Cover)*

Apart from the problems related to tourism, the people of Northern Areas too live a harsh life due to lack of basic modern amenities of life on one side and the unfriendly weather, especially in winter, on the other. In a documentary on *youtube.com* on Northern Areas, from *National Geographic Live*, the photographer Mathieu Paley (2015) visits Hunza and films the daily routine of the people of the area. He shows that these people have strong community atmosphere, as their language bears no connection with the rest of the regional languages of Pakistan. They use solid rock salt and has no concept of sugar. That is why their tea is called as *salt tea*, as they use salt with tea. The women live a very hard life as they take part in cutting wood for which they are supposed to go out of their houses for at least a two-hour trip. So, the



scenic beauty that everyone will aspire for becomes a life-in-death situation for them. These women also grow potatoes to cater to the nutritional needs of their respective families.

After having interpreted the repeatedly occurred word, *bird*, in the *Velvet of Loss*, it is concluded that it represents the current dismal condition of women in the context of Pakistan, especially those who live in the hilly chilly areas. Pakistani society is fundamentally patriarchal where women are supposed to live under the umbrella of man-made rules. Normally they are busy all the daylong and, in return, they are given second rate importance. It is even observed that in a combined family system, their tea and meals are cheaper having poorer nutrition than that of men. Their tea is blacker than whitish.

Moreover, through the foregrounded word, *butterfly*, in the poem, *Winter*, the same women plight is highlighted that they are living miserably. Through the repeated occurrence of assonance and consonance, the anagram, *singled*, is made that further foregrounds the fact that not only the women in the hilly areas take part in works outside home but they also manage every household chore single-handedly. This constant engagement makes their life very boring. Apart from this, there is no prompt medical facility in time of emergency, especially during child birth or miscarriage, per se.

In addition, the poem, *Dualism*, highlights the miserable plight of the young girls who become *deodasi* on the will of their parents and religious obligation. Women oppression with respect to *deodasi* from Indian perspective is not limited to Hinduism, it is observed in Muslim minority women as well. In her article, "Letting Women Be Heard", in the daily *Dawn*, Anum Shahayar (2018) reviews Ghazala Jamil's (2017) book, *Muslim Women Speak: Of Dreams and Shackles*. She quotes Ghazala Jamil saying that Muslim women in India are oppressed by the hands of patriarchy and have no opinion of their own; they are slavish followers of the men with whom they live. She further takes the issue to global extremes levelling charge against the men who use religion as a tool to oppress their women folk at domestic level. Anum Shahayar says:

*Jamil explains how recollecting communal violence left the girls quiet and teary, unable to give voice to their feelings. In such cases, silence became an element of the research itself. (p. 10, The Dawn)*

The same theme of deprivation is maintained in the poem, *The Sin*, where the plight of the widows is foregrounded. It has become very difficult, for widows, to make both ends meet. There is no such relief for the bereaved and the downtrodden in Pakistan. To earn with dignity becomes difficult. It is here that most of them would fall easy prey to the ugly clutches of perversity on behalf of their children to survive. Sometimes it becomes difficult for women to guard themselves against oppressor's hands. For instance, The Amnesty International shared on social media ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com), 15 May, 2018) the death sentence ordered by the Sudanese court against a nineteen years old Noura Hussein who killed the man who raped her.

Women oppression is also implicitly maintained in Khan's poem, *N.A. Reflections*. Women in Northern Areas of Pakistan live a harsh life, as is discussed by Mathieu Paley on his visit to Hunza in 2015. The women of this area spends hours outside their homes in cutting wood. They are working side by side with men apart from rearing of children and fulfilling household chores. So, the scenic beauty that everyone will aspire for becomes a life-in-death situation for them. Paley (2015) maintains that they also grow potatoes to cater to the nutritional needs of their respective families.

The theme of women oppression is also highlighted in the poem, *Circus Girl*, where a beautiful and attractive girl is being watched while performing on the stage carrying a world of



sorrow and pity in her eyes but the lookers-on are passing comments on her protruded body parts. Here, in this poem women are depicted as a source of entertainment for men. They are used as show pieces and are exploited due to their poverty, helplessness or being sole livers deprived of family or lost when they were children, or abducted for the purpose. Whatever the case may be, the beastly attitude of men towards their so-called *lost rib* is exposed by Khan with an economy of words and in highly suggestive and foregrounded language.

The plight of the dancing girls or prostitutes is foregrounded through the noun phrases *the lonely tear* and *the trembling cheek*. It also highlights their worries and fear of being exploited by the rich and molesters of the society. They are used as tools of entertainment. Everyone enjoys these girls' body contours but do not pay least attention to their degraded condition. This situation is maintained through the words *seductive* and *flood* and the phrase *dirty grin*. Khan has portrayed these abusers and molesters of the society through the repetition of phonemes which gives the anagram, *flee from him as he is pig*. This reveals the licentious males of the society who become animals and devour the female flesh. This is also applicable to the female hostages during war at world level. In a BBC documentary report (2018), Shireen, a victim of ISIS, and the correspondent Stacey interview, an ISIS captive commander, in which he confesses to have killed as many as 900 people and raped over 200 girls.

In addition, the theme of cruelty is suggested by Khan in his poem, *The Stranger*. In this poem the life of labourers is foregrounded that is full of misery as it is quite difficult for them to have both ends meet. More often, they live from hand to mouth. The machine age has lowered their importance as most of the things are now done not by hands but through machines.

Moreover, *The Stranger*, implies the theme of exploitation through deviational use of words and repetition of phonemes. Through the word, *stranger*, Khan projects the poor living condition of the working class of the society – their identity is lost in the rubbles. Moreover, it also universalizes the working class's hard work and low wages, despite the fact the Labour Day is celebrated internationally every year on 1<sup>st</sup> May. Through the phrases *wane and worn out, a cup of tea/ and the miseries of/ the whole world* the sub-human condition of the labourers is foregrounded. Their male-nutritional condition is shown through snatching of the tea. This has become their routine that they will be exploited by the rich of the society which is highlighted through *yesterday was hard/ and too tied* which also lacks pronoun thereby generalizing the condition of the labour class. Their ill-health and retention of labour even in old age are foregrounded through *walked out/ like a shadow* and *bending forward/ like a tree*.

Through the alliteration, assonance and consonance, Khan brings to the surface the message that working class people lead life from hand to mouth as is shown through the anagram worked out of the sounds: *workmen's life is filled with deadly situation*. Moreover, through the repetition of consonant sounds of /t/ and /d/ that fall in "happy not to be identified" and the phrase "to do" suggest that the rich thinks their job is *to do* nothing rather they are happy that they do not belong to the working class.

Though it is a fact that every year the *International Labour Day* is celebrated on 1<sup>st</sup> May the world over, yet little is done for the miserable plight of the actual actors. In our part of the world they are given five hundred rupees as daily wages despite the fact that they work for eight



hours, hence it becomes very difficult for them to provide balanced diet to their family which ultimately leads to their poor health – and thus the drama begins in which the ill-health gets the longest episode. The very title of the poem suggests that their poverty is not taken into consideration. Whether it is child labour, women labour or men labour, they are exploited everywhere. The *Streetnet* organizer, Monica Garzaro Scott (2018) epitomizes the 1<sup>st</sup> of May celebration:

*Self-employed workers are the majority in the cities and in the rural areas, they produce a major portion of wealth and employment. Only by acting in a united and organised form in a common front can they achieve recognition of their human and labour rights, and achieve decent lives and work. Only then will they fully celebrate the first of May.*  
(Front page)

The same idea of exploitation is carried in the poem, *A Bleak Winter Garden* too where a polish boy and an unemployed stranger are taken to represent their class. The idea of sadness over the miserable plight of the working class is embodied in the very title of the poem where the noun *garden* is qualified through *bleak* and *winter* thereby giving the notion that no doubt one's homeland is a garden for them but if it does not bear fruit rather it is a curse. On the other hand it is also suggestive of the fact that poor people does not need flowers rather they are worried all the time about their subsistence. The metaphor of *life's dust* that is being brushed by the *polish boy* foregrounds that these people really work hard to change their condition, though it is difficult for them to do so due to societal harsh and exploitative attitude. Khan, here, employs the adjective *tired* that projects the idea that though these people are tired to get a well-paid job, yet they should not waste their time in *puffing* and sitting idly. This idea of hope and encouragement is foregrounded through the noun phrase *the lonely writer*. In addition, the combination of the repetitive phonemes gives the anagrammatized sentence that *life is sin if it is just puffing*.

## Conclusion

Khan has projected through his choice of linguistic categories and parallel sounds the poor and sub-human condition of the working class. He puts this responsibility on the shoulders of the high ups of the society as well as on the labourers. The rich should avoid exploitation of the poor and the poor too should not waste their time by sitting idly and puffing only. Only then, there can be balance in the society that would lead to overall happiness and prosperity.

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